

Max's Folly



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Bill Turpin



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*To Lindsay Brown,
the love of my life
and my indispensable editor*



N O W

To the Edge of the Abyss



MAX SET HIS smartphone on vibrate-plus-tone and slipped it into his breast pocket so he could “feel the buzz”. Then he put his wristwatch on the same settings, plus a beep every minute. The phone was set for 1:40, the watch for 1:45. Failing to be at the office by 2 p.m. was not an option, and Max’s formerly excellent relationship with time was no longer reliable.

He was walking around downtown Halifax, something he did religiously when he had problems to solve, and he had three of them. Big ones. He struggled to focus on the most urgent, but his issues with time had gripped him hard and would not let go.

Until recently, Max had paid little attention to time, even though it had been kind to him. (He looked young for his age, everyone said.) On the rare occasions when he thought of time, he pictured himself on some sort of rocket-sled; the future and the present blurring by him, the past a short, bright rocket-flame pushing against his back. And, sometimes, Max could see just enough of what lay ahead to give him an advantage. So for decades he had been secure

flank. Then Max would casually fire a political spear into its vitals.

The CEO hired the sharks, and Max got them fired. It was part of the rhythm of the office. It kept all the fish alert and happy.

Max passed the drugstore, a key landmark, which displayed a large sign declaring “your health matter’s”. The owners imagined this to be a clever pun, but it earned only derision from Max because of the egregious use of the apostrophe. But health definitely mattered these days. Max had heard through the family grapevine that the Brother was having “difficulties”, and he suspected these, like his own troubles, involved the same ability to travel through time. Why *wouldn't* time-jumping be an inherited trait?

He felt terrible. Time-jumping had been critical to his life but his head had been so far up his own backside that he never really noticed. Now — and this felt like a premonition coming on — it might even be too late to talk it over with the Brother.

The need to talk was urgent because time-jumping had begun putting Max out of sync with the rotation of the Earth, and sometimes he would find himself east or west of a destination without any recollection of how it happened. This was because during the jump Max would continue to “rotate” from east to west, while the planet and its inhabitants stood still.

Max attributed these difficulties to his metabolism changing as he aged. He adapted by buying the latest in wearable “smart” technology. This brought most of the jumping outcomes under control. He dealt with the rest according to circumstance. If his trip took him west, he would

compensate for rotation by walking faster. When headed east, he set his watch for 10 seconds less between beeps. This kept him out of the harbour. Walking north or south, he would subtly walk to the east by leaning that way to resist the rotation. He could not imagine how it looked to passers-by, but it seemed to work. On the other hand, it might explain why the CEO had been urging Max to ride with him to meetings in a taxi.

Max stopped at the newsstand which, as usual, was festooned with *Cosmopolitan* magazines that were in turn festooned with images of women who lacked pores and apparently knew gazillions of sexual techniques: *The longest weekend: Blast His Roman Candle to New Heights, Six Ways to Make His Star Burst, How to Make his Cracker Fire.*

Sex was another facet of Max's life affected by time-jumping, although with results that were more agreeable: the marital bed, mostly lukewarm since they hit their forties, had re-ignited.

Until recently the *Cosmo* surveys the Wife left lying around indicated that she was "not at all interested" in sex and "almost never" had an orgasm "with a partner". Max concluded that he must be at fault for this. Faulty time-jumping, he deduced, was causing him to "arrive", as the French say, early.

But now Max sometimes arrived later. This development might well be what shifted his wife to "somewhat interested" in sex, and it got Max thinking. He realized that if he could point the Wife due east, he would finish inside her no matter when he arrived. So, the next time he came to bed and found the Wife nude under the sheets, which meant that sex was on the table, Max seized the opportunity.

He climbed into bed and kissed her while sliding his hand over her abdomen, his customary opening move. "I want to try something," he said. "I want to line you up a certain way before we do it." To his surprise, instead of rejecting him, she smiled a little sheepishly and flushed. Her nipples perked up.

"Okay," she said, her voice croaking ever so slightly, whereupon she threw off the bedclothes and lay naked before him with her arms stiffly beside her. It had been a long time since she displayed herself like that. Max had earlier made a small mark on the wall that was due east, so he quickly grabbed her ankles and swung her around. She actually giggled as he took sightings along the length of her bare body. When everything was set, he eased between her legs to her centre, where he found a warm welcome.

Even better, the eastward dislocation had the effect of making his thrusts seem harder and increasingly rapid. That, combined with his newly late arrivals, eventually moved her along *Cosmo's* continuum to "very interested in sex" and "almost always" having an orgasm "with a partner". She began to suggest new positions and methods for lining her up. Once, breathlessly, she suggested that she go on all fours. It took Max far longer than usual to line her up, in part because she seemed to be resisting while at the same time insisting that the task be accomplished with absolute precision. By the time he had them both arranged, the Wife was urging him in the frankest terms to begin the final act. Max accomplished it easily, she being wildly wanton and he stiff as a flagpole. His last memory before the time-jump was her lovely long back extended out before him, her spine precisely in line with the rotation of the earth.

When he caught up in time, he found she had cuddled up and was looking at him softly. “It’s been a long time ...,” she said.

“We married young, started a family,” Max said quickly, “and we had busy careers. There’s hardly been time. But now we’re in a new phase of our lives.”

Max was back on the street, relieved and grateful that his mind had turned to the business problem at hand. He checked his watch. Five minutes to go. He felt the countless ideas that had been teasing him for days coalesce into a solution. Time to get to work. The remaining item on his mind, the mystery of his secret admirer at the office, would have to wait.

• • •

Max was at the head of the agency’s long table, which he knew was little more than a glorified piece of Plexiglas skillfully designed and polished to look expensive.

Paintings, rented from the government art bank, tastefully lined the tasteful walls. They were well-done and interesting, but not so much that guests would be distracted. The Company Values were inscribed on a plaque: “Kindness, Kindness, Kindness.” When asked about it, the CEO would explain that it was at the insistence of the company founder.

The CEO was to his left, flesh spilling over his collar. Nose hairs were visible, poised to become the leading feature of his physiognomy.

Next to the CEO was Max’s Communications Director, playing the foil to the CEO’s iconoclastic genius. Dressed in spotless casuals, she was calm as a cat enjoying a sunbeam,

charming the clients and patiently awaiting her day as head of the firm.

The clients — two men and two women, one in a wheelchair — seemed out of place but he couldn't put his finger on it. Max fished his notes from his jacket pocket, gave them a quick glance and started in.

"Thank you for coming today," Max said. "Out of respect for your time, I won't beat around the bush: people love your product."

Max's Communications Director was the first to signal alarm, pushing her note-book away and firing her deer-in-the-headlights look at Max.

Christ, only four words into it and already she's bitching. Max moved on.

"And they love your employees ..."

Suddenly the CEO looked like he was about to drive his new Mercedes into a concrete post. He stared at his notepad and muttered something like "For the love of ..."

"... But they hate your company," Max said.

The clients' eyes widened as though Max had pulled out a gun. The CEO jumped to his feet and escorted Max to a corner. "They'll just be a second," the Communications Director said casually, making it clear it was all part of the creative process.

"Maxie," the CEO whispered. "The power company was yesterday."

"Yeah," Max said neutrally.

"Today it's the Abilities Bakery. Their bakers are all mentally or physically challenged and they have to lay off four of them. You're giving them the presentation we did for the power corporation."

Max pursed his lips: “It just seems like that. Let me run with it.” Worst time-jump ever, he thought.

“Please, no,” said the CEO.

“It’s all good,” Max replied.

He returned to the head of the table and paused for effect.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my partner has reminded me that you’re not ‘suits.’” He looked at each pale face in turn: “A teacher, a retired engineer, a former elite athlete and an accountant with a private practice. You are a volunteer board.

“Sometimes I like to show clients how bad things could be if they don’t take action. It’s a shock tactic. But I can see I’ve done you a disservice. You’ve invested heart and soul in the Abilities Bakery. You are not complacent.”

More pause for effect while he ransacked his memory for the correct talking points.

“And I don’t need these notes,” he said, tossing the power company index cards into a wastebasket. He picked up a brief from in front of the CEO and held it up.

“I’ve read your recovery plan, and what we communications folks call the ‘key messages’ are already written — by you. Here’s how it works:

“When asked about layoffs, you simply say that no one is jobless. Instead, four people who’ve proven their skills at the Abilities Bakery have found jobs working side by side with abled people.

“When asked about the bakery’s future without government funding, you show them your business plan and say that you will *double* the current staff in five years.

“When asked why you think your plan will work, you say that it was inspired by the courage, determination and *resourcefulness* that your staff demonstrate *every day*.

“You say that your staff have taught you to see opportunity where others see adversity.”

Jeez, this is good stuff, Max thought.

When he spoke next, his voice was subdued but strong.

“You can say that, because it’s the truth. You tell them that the Abilities Bakery has *a new future*. That your product is the best in town because your employees understand their *abilities* and they are ready to *compete* for their share of the market and on an equal footing. In the past nine years, no fewer than 14 people have gone from the Abilities Bakery to the mainstream workforce. A remarkable record.”

Max concluded with: “My admiration for your company knows no bounds.” And he meant it.

Half an hour later there were smiles all around as he escorted their satisfied clients to the elevator. By God, Maxie, you’ve pulled it out of the fire again, he thought as he watched them disappear behind the doors. But things weren’t quite as rosy at the debrief.

“You can’t keep doing this,” his Communications Director said even before they got back to the meeting room.

“What do you mean? We’ve been through dozens of scrapes like this.”

The CEO spoke up next. “But, Max, it’s always been because the client wasn’t buying the pitch, not because ... not because you forgot it.”

“First time it’s happened,” he replied. He understood how others could interpret a bad jump as a memory lapse.

“No,” said the Communications Director, with a gentleness that unnerved him. “There was Pike Video, the Archdiocese ...”

“The Archdiocese, those sons of ...”

20-foot drop into the black water of the harbour. The only barrier was a four-by-four railing at foot level.

In a day of bad jumps, this one took the cake. Max headed for his bus stop, his mind resolutely focused on the act of walking, lest he set off another, perhaps final, time-jump. By the time he boarded the bus, he could feel the pull of home and safety.

As the bus rolled on, the harbour-scare slipped from his mind. Instead, he began to wonder if his increasingly complicated time-jumping theory was some kind of denial, like guys who explain away their chest pains as poor digestion until they collapse on the street.

Present But Not Accounted For



MAX SAT CALMLY beside the Son and listened to the conversation with the specialist. He could feel the Son's distress and wanted to be glad for it; wanted the Son to be a villain. But there are no villains in this piece, he thought.

"It's happening faster than we expected," the Son said. "Last week, he took down every picture of my mother and threw them in the garbage." The Son's brown eyes were wide as they always were when he was upset. My eyes, for sure, thought Max. But the rest was the Wife's—firm chin, prominent forehead.

Max noted that people now talked about him as if he were not present in the room. More of that to come if he didn't do something, he suspected.

"The images of her were torturing me," Max shouted, as if volume finally might break through the Son's inability to understand. "I see her picture sometimes and I don't know whether she's alive or dead."

The Son asked the specialist if it was possible the sudden death of the Wife had hastened Max's memory problems. The doctor said it was impossible to know.

“Sometimes the healthy spouse will cover it up,” he said. “People don’t realize how bad it is until a crisis occurs.”

Max did not care. He was no longer onside with all this nonsense.

“Sorry, but you’re both full of it,” Max said. “I’ve got some memory problems that are perfectly normal for someone my age. The real issue is time-jumping. I’ve just got to adapt a bit.”

“Dad, I thought we agreed on this.”

“I was pressured into agreeing. Anyway, carry on talking. I know nothing I say will change your mind.”

Meaning that he would soon lose his freedom. Further, he worried the incarceration would be a long one; he figured he had many years to go before time’s river returned him to the ocean. So, rather than rot away in an institution, he had resolved to become a full-time time traveller. He would find the Wife in the right place and in the right time — a snug spot along that river’s bank — and stay there.

But even time travellers — perhaps especially time travellers — needed reference points.

Max interrupted the meeting to ask for some paper (he already had a pencil stub).

The Son failed to hide his irritation as he passed him a sheet of paper from the doctor.

“What for, Dad?”

“Just making some notes for the journey, Son.”

Max isn’t sure how to begin the journey. Maybe click his heels a few times, or ...

1975

Your Friendly Local Junta Cracks Heads



MAX CAN ONLY stare when the Photog appears before him. The two of them are sitting in a classic Spanish-American plaza that Max hasn't seen in 40 years. The Photog, on the other hand, continues talking exactly as he did back in the day without missing a beat.

Max understands that he has made an enormous time jump, but the insight has the lifespan of a shooting star, gone almost before it arrives.

“So, Max. What eez our RAY-cord as freelance foreign correspondents so far?” the Photog asks.

Out of habit, Max pushes his hand deep into his left pocket, fishing for the familiar feel of the thrice-folded sheet of paper that he's kept there, along with a pencil stub, since his first reporting job. They provide a rudimentary way of taking notes when he isn't carrying a notepad. Also, when he is confused or has a problem to work out, the feel of the objects helps keep him grounded.

“So, Max! What eez our RAY-cord so far?”

The Photog is initiating their daily ritual of self-ridicule over their miserable record as freelancers since they quit

the Sunday Tabloid and left Montreal to make their reputations. He comically exaggerates his Spanish accent. His tone oozes curiosity, as if he has no idea what the answer to his question might be. His face is obscured, as usual, by long black hair, some kind of floppy army hat, and cigarette smoke.

Max is into the game. He liberates his notebook from his back pocket and pretends to stare thoughtfully at the blank pages before taking a pull on his beer. The Photog raises his eyebrows in bogus expectation.

“We have been to four countries in four weeks, arriving in each case a day or so after the story we were chasing suddenly clutched its chest, keeled over, and died before hitting the ground,” Max says.

His friend who, even at 25, looks like a genial plantation-owner — minus the expensive clothes and Panama hat, but with the bushy moustache — exhales a fresh blossom of blue smoke around his head. Max takes a sweet-potato chip from a bowl on their café table, which is leaning under the weight of the Photog’s bulging bag of cameras and lenses.

The interior of the bag features a homemade prow of quarter-inch plywood built into the lining and designed for pushing through scrums. A wad of dubious identification cards is attached to the bag by a chain. The one on display reads: “*Prensa Internacional*.”

They are in the shade of a balcony that extends the entire length of the long, wide-open plaza. Shops and restaurants line the ground floor. Above are three storeys of colonial-style apartments.

“And ... today, Max?” Again, an eyebrow is raised expectantly.

“Today, we are in YOUR country, waiting for a student

demonstration. This is because of something that successful correspondents call a 'tip'. We are relaxing with beer and snacks because we expect, as per usual, that nothing will happen."

"*Es verdad*," says the Photog. "I am a FOUR-een corr-eez-POND-ent ... een my own ... CONN-tree. My mother's house ... eez 10 blocks a-WAY. Tell me, Max, what will we do if there EEZ a demonstration?"

"We will file a story and pics to an international wire service."

"Aha! A big payday at last?"

Max pretends to consult his notes again. "For our efforts we will receive bylines and photo credits. Oh, and four rolls of film."

"But this time, lots of money as well, no?"

"It seems not."

Max can see the presidential palace across the plaza, directly behind the Photog. It is a large baroque affair no doubt, somehow, celebrating the vicious exploits of the Conquistadors. The area in front of the palace, as well as the plaza itself, is paved with stones and devoid of anything that might interfere with a defensive line of fire from the presidential guard. A rugged iron fence forms the perimeter of the palace grounds. Max can easily picture bodies piling up against the bars.

He hears engines belching. The noise heralds a phalanx of motorcycles that careens into the plaza from Max's left and turns sharply toward the palace.

"Ahh," says the Photog, now doing an Ed Sullivan impersonation. "Ladies and gennulman, please welcome ... *El Presidente!*"

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About the Author



Bill Turpin has worked most of his career as a journalist, first in Montreal and more recently Halifax, but has also afflicted government and the communications world. He is currently living off his wits while studying to be a gadfly. Turpin is married and the father of two cats. *Max's Folly* is his first novel.